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Gov. Blunt Signs Stroke Center Bill

By Joyce L. Miller

Lake of the Ozarks, Mo. - In 2006, heart disease and stroke made up one-third of all Missouri deaths. A piece of legislation signed on Friday could significantly lower that number.

With the governor's signature, Missouri becomes the first state in the nation to improve emergency response to heart attacks and strokes by developing a statewide system of care.

House Bill 1790, sponsored by Rep. Wayne Cooper, R- Camdenton, creates a system that handles heart attacks and strokes much like trauma centers.

Research shows patients transported to designated stroke centers and STEMI centers, rather than simply the nearest hospital, have higher survival rates.

On Friday, Gov. Matt Blunt signed a bill into law that will implement a statewide system for the delivery of services to stroke and heart attack patients when minutes can make the difference between life and death or long-term disability.

"Heart disease and stroke are some of the leading causes of death in Missouri and this legislation will help ensure that heart attack and stroke patients in our state receive the right care, in the right place, at the right time," Blunt said in a news release issued Friday. "We must continue to work together to create a new and better health care system for our state."

Missouri has designated trauma centers, which care for the most severely injured patients in emergencies. The legislation expands the emergency system by developing guidelines for designating stroke and STEMI centers.

Cooper said hundreds lives can be saved annually by getting patients to facilities where they get the specialized care they need in the right amount of time.

"It'll be a regionalized plan that will identify the facilities that can better respond," he said. "Minutes are critical to stroke and heart attack patients. We want to get them to a facility that provides that type of care."

The health department has already been preparing the state to implement a system of stroke and STEMI centers. A Time Critical Diagnosis Task Force that was formed by the department in November has been meeting to discuss how to build the new system. The task force included more than 100 members of the emergency medicine community.

Cooper says the legislation reflected the work of a large coalition of medical professionals and others who worked on developing the concept for the stroke and heart attack system.

The bill made it through the legislative session the first time around. Typically, Cooper said, it takes two to three years to get a piece of legislation passed and signed.

Sen. Charles Shields, R-St. Joseph, sponsored the legislation for Cooper on the Senate side.

Cooper said the bill received widespread support from emergency response personnel who are often the ones who are caring for stroke and heart attack victims in emergency situations.

The Missouri Foundation for Health and the Missouri Department of Health and Seniors Services and a coalition of professionals have been looking at ways to improve the emergency medical services for several years, Cooper said.

According to the American Heart Association coronary heart disease is the No. 1 cause of death in the United States. Stroke is the No. 3 cause of death in the United States and a leading cause of serious disability.